

Why Mormon leaders are 'deeply troubled' by Oregon militiamen

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which prides itself on being law-abiding, sought to distance itself Monday (January 4) from self-styled militiamen who last weekend seized a federal wildlife reserve in southeastern Oregon.

In a statement, the LDS church condemned the armed seizure of the facility and said it was “deeply troubled” by reports that the militiamen are doing so based on scriptural principles.

“This armed occupation can in no way be justified on a scriptural basis,” it said.

The statement came after release of a 20-minute YouTube video by Ammon Bundy, a Mormon and the son of Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher whose disputes with federal authorities gained notoriety in recent years. Ammon Bundy said he and his brother, Ryan, came to help defend Dwight Hammond Jr. and Steven Hammond, father-and-son ranchers who were convicted of arson involving federal lands.

“I clearly understood that the Lord was not pleased with what was happening to the Hammonds,” Ammon Bundy said in the video, “and that if it was not corrected, it would be a type and a shadow of what would happen to the rest of the people across this country.”

Bundy later said in the video, “I began to understand what we were supposed to do is we were supposed to get together individuals all across this country that understood and cared about what was happening and understood that our Constitution was being violated that is hanging by a thread.”

The phrase “hanging by a thread” is taken from accounts of the so-called “White Horse Prophecy,” attributed to LDS church founder Joseph Smith Jr.

Although unsubstantiated, the vision attributed to Smith talks about the U.S. Constitution, saying it would “hang like a thread as fine as a silk fiber” and only be rescued by a “white horse,” a reference to Revelation 6:1-8.

“There’s a strain of Mormonism that’s very strongly right-wing,” said Boyd Jay Petersen, program coordinator for Mormon studies at Utah Valley University in Orem. “Joseph Smith claimed the U.S. Constitution was inspired and a lot of people think it’s Scripture.”

Petersen said the protesters’ statements “were sounding so Mormon” the LDS church felt it “needed to place itself outside of that.”

And while the Oregon protesters may have a point regarding federal land policy overreach, Ralph Hancock, a political science professor at LDS church-owned Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, said taking up arms went beyond what the religion teaches.

“The church has worked long and hard for decades to win a place within the mainstream of U.S. society and politics,” said Hancock. “It is not about to throw away significant gains for the sake of a handful of zealots.”